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Embargoed until 3:45 PM, 6 November 2010

Managing Change by Strategic Navigation

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Session 11, Workshop 11.4: „Managing Structural Change in Partnered Governance"
Our Common Future, Essen, November 6th, 2010

Summary

'When we navigate our way through the world, there are different pulls, constraints and freedoms that move us forward'
(Massumi, in Zournazi, 2003:1)

Imagine ......

It is the middle of the ocean. Several people are paddling a raft. They are not shipwrecked, but have come together for some reason (it could be a race or a dare). It is a makeshift raft, with makeshift paddles. They don't know where they are very precisely and they are out of sight of land, trying to make headway in an ocean of varying currents, with varying waves, wind speeds and directions.

Their overall objective – or trajectory – is to reach land.

So, how might they go about getting there? I argue that it is probably through a series of short-term projects, such as:

- trying to work out where they are. Where do they think they came from? How might they have got here from there? What elements, actants or forces influenced their getting here? What can they remember?

- trying to work out future potentialities, eg, what are the elements involved and what are the interdependencies: the relations or connections (and disconnections) between them? Which relations are likely to be more powerful? With what implications? For instance:

- the condition of the raft and the paddles – they are very makeshift – a bricolage of objects which need constant patching up; bits fall off; chemicals in a plastic container are leaking and eating away the rope binding the raft together;

- the ocean and its currents – they may anticipate the general direction of the currents but they cannot predict them;

- the weather – sun? storms? stars and knowledge about positions of constellations? Or is it too cloudy?

- the strength of the people on board the raft – this relates to availability of food, water, heat, body mass, physical and mental strength, etc;

- desires of the people on board – to survive; to be a hero; to remain adrift just long enough to attract sponsorship for a book deal with potential film rights;

- chance (the aleatory) eg hazards such as icebergs, huge containers lost from ships;

- hope – of seeing a ship which stops for them; that the blur on the horizon turns out to be land;

Having worked out the interdependencies between these (and other) elements, determinants or actants, can the people on board tweak any of them so that the outcomes might be more favourable? What experimentation might be productive? Ditching a sick person to save food and water for the others? Dumping the chemicals container to save the rope, although the container gives the raft extra buoyancy? Making the raft look aesthetically attractive?

The people will need to 'live' or 'belong' together, with flexibility and adaptability: creative experimentation. Depending on circumstances and what seems to work (or not), they will probably change their means (eg making a sail, ditching a container), the direction they go in (eg someone thinks they see land far off to the left), and perhaps even their goals.

Of course, with several people on the raft, each with their own identity and culture, they probably will not agree on the direction they want to go in or the actions they should take to get there.

Making 'headway' or 'progress' involves processes of what I call 'strategic navigation'. I argue that such processes resonate strongly with ideas of strategic spatial planning for metropolitan change.

I regard strategic spatial planning as concerned with the future transformation of place, incorporating a combination of social, environmental, economic and political values about society. I propose that its practice be concerned with trajectories or pathways rather than specified end-points. I regard spatial planning as an experimental practice working with doubt and uncertainty, engaged with adaptation and creation - a speculative exercise – and I suggest a definition of spatial planning as strategic navigation along the lines of the investigation of 'virtualities' unseen in the present; the speculation about what may yet happen; the inquiry into what at a given time and place we might think or do and how this might influence socially and environmentally just change in spatial form (Hillier, 2007).

The ocean – or global stream - which strategic spatial planners attempt to navigate is messy with potentialities, possibilities and uncertainties, mostly beyond their control. The UN-Habitat Report (2009) calls for development of systems of planning which include provision of a flexible, 'forward' long-range spatial plan consisting of broad frameworks and principles, with which detailed local plans and mega-projects should mesh. Such a 'two-pronged' or, as I suggest, a multi-planar, approach facilitates adaptiveness or strategic navigation in environments where futures are complex and uncertain.

A multiplanar approach to strategic spatial planning

The approach offers the potential for multiple plans:

- Several (or perhaps one collectively preferred) trajectories or 'visions' of the longer-term future, including concepts towards which actants desire to navigate, such as sustainability;

- Shorter-term, location-specific detailed plans and projects with collaboratively determined tangible goals, for example, for mainstreet regeneration, provision of cultural facilities and so on.

Navigating strategically across multiple plans requires practitioners to sense and discern connections in what is taking place, to try to understand the underlying dynamics and interdependencies between elements/actants/forces, to appreciate the diverse possibilities of what is happening and what might happen and to respond by designing actions which align with the intentions and values of the agreed longer-term strategic trajectory (Hames, 2007a: 114), but which are contextually appropriate, not copy/pastes of other, previous or 'best' practices.

NB the term 'actant' includes humans and non-humans and enables them to have agency, eg rivers flooding have strategic effects.

My next task is to find ways of thinking about the particularities of planning practice in order to translate these ideas into questions that practitioners might consider. I argue for an emphasis on the relational dynamics of forces, such that analysis entails detailed tracing of the conditions of possibility of how things/places/problems came to be constituted as products of particular contingencies through unfolding power-laden relations between elements and of mapping them into the future. As such, we need to identify the determinants or drivers of change, the interdependencies or relations between these determinants and between them and actants.

**Strategic Navigation**

'Conventional strategic planning is dead! In a world where strategy is a commodity, navigation and imagination become the critical factors'

(Hames, 2007a:229)

I develop the concept of strategic spatial planning as strategic navigation, adapting the term from Richard Hames' work on organisational management and Cathy Wilkinson's work in strategic planning in Melbourne.

Hames (2007a: 228-229) defines strategic navigation as 'the art of confidently and ethically finding viable paths into the future, negotiating unknown terrain and unprecedented complexity while retaining integrity and relevance'. He advocates a methodology of 'strategy-as-process' – 'a continuous braiding of intelligence creation with insightful action' (Hames, 2007a: 81)

Strategic navigation is a collaborative conversation that weaves between specific episodes and local or micro stories, the networks and coalitions of governance processes, and the macro of governance cultures (Healey, 2007: 21-23, adapted). Hames (2007a: 253, 2007b: 6) depicts this conversation as a strategic-learning spiral – which I prefer as a less closed, a more open **rhizome** - of sensing, making sense and designing and enacting.
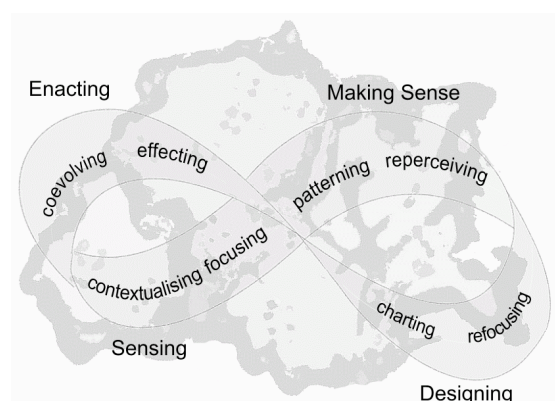
Hames suggests that practitioners ask strategic questions aimed at uncovering not only the driving forces in play behind different behaviours, but also why actants see and explain the world as they do (elements of *Contextualising* and *Focusing*). The element of *Patterning* integrates the different perspectives and knowledges derived from Contextualising and Focusing into understandings of what is happening and what might happen if… . *Reperceiving* and *Refocusing* would entail foresight-based diagramming of issues and implications, from which 'leverage points' are identified and pertinent responses are designed in a strategic 'plan' component (*Charting*). The rhizome incorporates continuous reflexion, reperception and revision of information, ideas and intentions as new knowledges emerge, circumstances alter and decisions change the context and issue focus (*Effecting* and *Co-evolving*).

In relation to these elements, I offer some possible issues and questions for consideration.

To **_Sense_** entails looking back retrospectively in a systematic manner. It involves:

Contextualising performs understanding of the context in which strategic planning is to take place; a sensing of what is going on and how things came to be. Questions include:

- What are the **key characteristics** of the socio-economic-political environment? In what discourses and in material manners are they actualised?

- What are the **critical relationships** between these characteristics?

- What were their **conditions of possibility**? How did they come to be? What did actants say, write, do? Why? What were the impacts on other actants?

- What were the **dynamics of power or force relations** between actants? Power, emotions, desires etc revealed by discourses and material objects. What were the prevailing dispositions, ideologies and imperatives?

- **What changed? Why**?

Focusing arrives at an initial, shared understanding of critical issues. Questions include:

- What are the **most strategically significant issues requiring attention**? Why? What dispositions or imperatives prevail?

- **What are the relationships** between these and other dispositions and issues?

- What relationships **matter most**? Why?

- What **most concerns key decision makers**? Why?

- **What control or influence can planners exercise** over these issues and their relationships?

- What assumptions lead us to these conclusions? How do planners regard themselves and other actants? (as experts, as mediators? Others as greedy developers, NIMBY local residents?)

- Do other actants share these conclusions? How do they regard themselves and the planners?

Contextualising and Focusing explore how elements and processes respond to both their own logics and to external pressures and stimuli. It is an exploration of the relations, associations and encounters between elements, events and structures: between, for example, private infrastructure capital, national and international agencies of governance and interest groups, scientists, environmentalists and so on, and flows of information, actualised in materialities and discursivities such as texts, meetings, demonstrations etc. It is an 'analysis of how forces of different types come to inhabit the same field' (Due, 2007:145).

Sensing asks the question, how did something come to be? Planners look not only at

- what actants may have said, written or done, but also at

- *why* they said, wrote or did it in such a manner and

- what force relations and conditions of possibility were involved.

Looking at wider practice, questions of

- who possessed an **ability** to say etc?;

- why in this particular manner?;

- why these particular **words** and at this particular **time**?;

- what was the **strategic imperative**?

- what referents or **discourses** were used?;

- what **materialities**?; why?

- what were the main internal and external **power relations** at work?

- **how did these power relations make discourses possible**?

- how were discourses used to support or undermine power relations?

- How did actants regard and treat themselves and other actants?

- how were power relations strategically **linked**?

- what were the **impacts** on other actants?

The aim is to cut through established strata of coding and hierarchical territorialisation of relationships between subjects, objects and words to work through how and why events came to actualise as they did; ie the conditions of possibility: what were the drivers?

Sensing thus overlays the product of something onto the process of its production. It can be performed at the micropolitical site level, analysing the unfolding state of affairs within which situations and sites are constituted. Conflicts tend to arise over the relations and connections which control framing of situations (ie how they are viewed and interpreted) and also about which elements, actants and issues are included in and excluded from frames.

Making Sense

Patterning integrates different perspectives and new knowledges into planners' understandings of what is happening and might happen in the future. Questions include:

- **What patterns of change** can we identify? **Are force relations changing** between actants? Are **dispositions, imperatives and ideologies** changing?

- How and why are these patterns changing? What connections and/or disconnections are occurring? How are changes manifest by discourses and materialities?

- **What are the gaps in our current thinking** and knowing?

- Where can we get the information from?

- **Are there other ways of perceiving the issues** which raise different questions, problems, opportunities?

Reperceiving then involves deepening awareness and understanding through finding new ways to view issues. Democratically inclusive foresighting or prospective exercises can offer multiple perspectives on alternative futures. Outcomes can significantly change beliefs about what is important to actants. Questions include:

- What new insights can be gleaned from the various prospectives?

- What are the **conditions of possibility** of the various prospectives? What ideological commitments, assumptions, blockages, oppositions might actualise?

- What are the key relations between actants?

- **How may force relations play out in the future**?

- What changes might there be and why?

- What implications do these insights have for strategic planning?

Strategic navigation involves *both* the deductive interpretation of 'symptoms' or 'drivers' of an actual situation *and* the invention or design of new, experimental and pragmatic ideas on a strategic plan.

Designing

To design involves discovery and perception of landmarks, useful for orientation purposes as something to head towards – 'a way of marking out the territory on the road' and 'a furtive glance sideways into an undecidable future' (both quotations Bosteels, 2001:895).

Designing is concerned with creative potential. The issue is not to attempt to define long-term detailed programmes of action, but to raise questions of potential agency and of socio-economic-political and institutional conditions of change.

Refocusing generates 'a set of various intersecting lines' (Deleuze, 1995: 33) concerned with the dynamic interrelation of relations (Massumi, 1992). By refocusing the connections between different power relations, one may be able to anticipate the potential distribution of 'the power to affect and … to be affected' (Deleuze, 1988a: 73): – the power of force relations between the various elements associated with the metaphorical raft.

Refocusing as a process would request strategic planners to map the proliferating interconnections between elements, to experiment with them and anticipate potential tensions and conflicts. A 'what might happen if …?' approach, not so much to predict, but to be alert to as-yet unknown potentialities (Deleuze, 1988b: 1-2). The idea is to try to anticipate the ways in which relations and alliances might be redistributed in different circumstances and situations.

Who and what might be power-full agents?

Who and what might form likely alliances? Why?

What knowledges might be important?

What tensions and antagonisms might occur? Over what issues?

Refocusing examines what, from the prospectives investigated, could be more or less likely to take place and could be more or less strategically important and why. Refocusing filters attention. Questions include:

- What are the most significant issues requiring attention?

- What specific factors make these issues critical and why? What force relations are important?

- How might these issues be addressed?

- **What might happen if …?**

- Does the planning system have the capacities to address these issues?

- What other actants should be involved?

- What should plans address in the short-term and long-term and why?

Charting involves evaluating the refocussed information, with a view to intervening strategically. As Bogue (2007: 10) describes, this is 'both a process of exploring and hence constructing connections …, and a process of undoing connections in an effort to form new ones'. It is not a process of standing back and describing, but of entering the relations between elements and 'tweaking' as many as possible in order to get a sense of what may emerge (Massumi, 2002: 207). Such an 'art of organising encounters' (Hardt, 1993: 110) involves guessing 'what decisions to make, when to make them, who to involve, and how in a context of dynamically complex change' (Hames, 2007a: 197, emphasis in original). It would entail attempting to select and to facilitate, or strategically navigate towards, potentially 'good' encounters and to avoid 'bad' ones. This is a pragmatic exercise in which strategic planners would attempt to intervene and manipulate relational forces and their potential connections and disconnections and their possible future trajectories. This is, of course, impossible to do with any precision. The future is a social construction in which nothing eventuates precisely as anticipated. Chance is often a powerful force. Strategic planning involves 'working with odds, guesses, predictions and judgements but not ever with certainty' (Rose, 2007: 468).

This raises several ethical issues. Who gives planning practitioners the authority to 'judge' which are 'good' and which are 'bad' actants, encounters and potentialities? Whose definition of 'good' or 'bad' is employed?

Charting involves preparing appropriate plans. Questions include:

- What strategies are possible?

- What **strategies might become possible** in the short or longer-term future, how and why?

- What are the **possible consequences, risks and opportunities** of these strategies?

- How can strategic plans be prepared so that the local planning authority remains responsive and adaptive?

- How can the linkages between the components of the strategic plans be described?

- Do the **strategies address key leverage points**?

<u>***Enacting***</u> implements and adapts plans.

   Effecting concerns implementation. Questions to consider include:

- **How will we know if the plans are effective** in navigating towards our strategic intentions?

- What would be an appropriate monitoring system?

- **How would we accommodate requirements for systemic change** in the plans?

- **What are we unaware of** that may cause problems in the future?

Co-evolving enables adaptation of practice and plans in the light of changes caused by those practices and plans. Questions include:

- **What signals will indicate that a fundamental change is occurring** in the context from which we defined the strategic plans?

- What may be the **critical, unintended consequences** of our plans?

- **Do we need to think differently** about our strategic intentions?

- Are we ignoring any force relations, connections or actants that might be critical?

- Do our plans need to change?

(adapted from Hames, 2007a, 2007b).

Continuous monitoring is required to ensure both that shorter-term plans and projects do not 'veer off' the broader trajectory of the longer-term vision, 'seduced' either by conventional thinking and inertia or 'the latest flavour of the month' (Hames, 2007a: 250), perhaps for yet another iconic building or retail centre.

Conclusions

Managing change through spatial planning entails learning something new and providing the opportunities for the emergence of the 'not-yet'. My raft analogy regards planning as a speculative and creative, yet structured, form of experimentation in the spatial. It would be concerned with strategically navigating 'journeys rather than destinations'.

By investigating specific stories about specific situations (the micropolitical) and sensing relationalities (the connections and disconnections between elements), we can make sense of the roles of actants (both human and non-human) in what took place and the processes which performed. Looking at the relations between elements rather than at the elements themselves, would be relatively new practice for most spatial planning practitioners, but by tracing the multiplicity of ways in which actants attempt to generate and express power through subjectivating others (eg through constraining their choices etc), through organisation (actions, laws, decisions) and through discourses we can begin to unfold the contingent systems which were actualised.

Sensing and making sense offer us a temporarily stabilised grid of reference for understanding what came to pass. We may be able to understand, for instance hypothetically, why one particular interest group (which we had anticipated would have a major impact on governance) faded into the background and remained a loose grouping of elements, whilst a different group mobilised support from temporary alliances of highly diverse actants, generated strategic agency, challenged the prevailing system and toppled the ruling regime.

Sensing/making sense are starting points. Emphasis then shifts to refocusing and charting potentialities. Refocusing enables charting of trajectories (strategic plans) representing desired future development of the metropolis. Strategic planning is experimental, testing out relations, recognising the limitations of particular constraints and attempting to work creatively where possible.

Longer-term plans should be adaptable as circumstances and determinants change. Just as the people on my metaphorical raft needed to adapt themselves and their goals in order to make progress. Strategic navigation is potentially an inclusive, democratic 'what might happen if …?' approach which allows disparate points of view to co-exist and which has a concern for multiplicity and complexity rather than systematic predictabilities.

Rather than current planning practice of using indicators and trend analyses, for instance, of

- the number of home units constructed over time, or

- the total footfall of pedestrians in the CBD as an indicator of retail demand,

and so on, strategic navigation would dig behind these figures to investigate issues, such as

- home starts increased as big urban fringe landowners brought forward their land for development by gaining planning permission for residential construction while their political 'friends' were still in power ahead of a key election. (Given such relations between actants, a high level of home starts would be unlikely to continue.)

- a high footfall of pedestrians in a CBD covered shopping mall, such as Newcastle in North East England, may reflect relations between the cold, wet and windy climate and high numbers of people unemployed. (Walking round or sitting in a covered mall, 'window shopping' and people-watching does not equate with consumer demand by the urban poor, but rather equates to somewhere warm, dry and interesting to spend time.)

I conclude that Strategic spatial planning by strategic navigation is a performance of risk-taking, of not being in total control, of transcending the technicalities of planning practice which demands that strategic spatial planners 'step outside what's been thought before, … venture outside what's familiar and reassuring, … to invent new concepts for unknown lands' (Deleuze, 1995: 103) and to allow possibilities for something new to emerge.

'Offerings of ways to think, and ultimately to act … move us in the direction of possibilities that had before been beyond our ken'

(May, 2003: 151)

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